

SUSTAINING A LOVING MARRIAGE

by Kate Harling MEd

Couples today are coming to a greater awareness of the importance of being more loving, open, and nurturing with each other. This is especially true in the area of sexuality. Our sexuality is very much a part of how we express ourselves as men and women. Learning what we want, how to ask for it and how to say "Yes" and "No" to our partners, and free us up to discover more of ourselves and each other. Our sexuality is not all of who we are, but sharing more fully with ourselves and our partner, whether alone or with another, is a key to a more loving and satisfying relationship.

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1. Discover some of the rules and myths we have grown up learning about sex. Which ones fit or don't fit for us now?
2. Gain information about male and female sexual anatomy. How do our own and our partner's bodies respond to sexual stimulation?
3. Discover what our sexual and sexual options are and which ones fit for us now.
4. Develop our own current picture of an "ideal sexual relationship".
5. Be able to specifically tell our partner what we enjoy and be able to listen openly and non-judgmentally to our partner's requests and preferences.
6. Expand our ability to experience with all our senses sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing through sexual stimulation.

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Most of us grow up in this culture with a very strong belief in the "ideal sexual relationship". This is a very narrow view of what is "normal" sex that we are taught to have. In the same way, human beings everywhere. This is not so. Each culture has its own set of sexual attitudes and values. The only thing that seems to be common for all cultures is that regulation of sexual behavior is universal.

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Couples today are coming to a greater awareness of the importance of being more loving, open, and nurturing with each other. This is especially true in the area of sexuality. Our sexuality is very much a part of how we express ourselves as men and women. Learning what we want, how to ask for it and how to say 'yes' and 'no' to our partners, can free us up to discover more of ourselves and each other. Our sexuality is not all of who we are, but sharing ourselves fully with our loved one can open another door to more love, intimacy, and pleasure!

In recent years, sex researchers, therapists and educators have reached similar conclusions when evaluating the ingredients that contribute to creating a satisfying sexual and sensual relationship. Generally this recipe for sexual well-being can be outlined as follows:

1. Become aware of the rules and myths we have grown up learning about sex. Which ones fit or don't fit for us now?
2. Gain information about male and female sexual physiology. How do our own and our partner's bodies respond sensually and sexually?
3. Discover what our sensual and sexual options are and which ones fit for us now.
4. Develop our own current picture of an "ideal sexual relationship".
5. Be able to specifically tell our partner what we enjoy; and be able to listen openly and non-judgementally to our partner's requests and preferences.
6. Expand our ability to experience pleasure with all our senses; sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing through practise, practise, practise!

Most of us grow up in this culture so ingrained with our learned notions about what is "normal" sex that we assume that this so-called norm is the same for human beings everywhere. This is not so. Each culture has its own set of sexual etiquette and taboos. The only thing that seems to be common for all cultures is that regulation of sexual behavior is universal!

However, this regulation varies drastically from society to society. For example, on the Polynesian island of Mangaia, it is considered foolish to enter into marriage without first completing one's sexual education through experimenting with multiple partners and most specifically with one's future spouse. Satisfying the woman is of prime concern and each young man is well schooled in how to pleasure a woman. Sexual contact is frequent and sex is considered a pleasurable and important aspect of relating to one's spouse.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the sexual mores found on the Isle of Inis Beag off the coast of Ireland. Here the knowledge of sexuality is so controlled that women only learn such natural body functions as menstruation when they occur. Couples do not wed until their mid-thirties and the possibility of sexual orgasm for women appears to be practically unknown to men or to women. Nudity is such a taboo that it is a serious breach of etiquette for a man to have his shoes off in front of another man's wife!

We may not wish to personally adopt either one of these sexual standards. However, knowing that the expression of human sexuality is so integrally linked to our cultural norms can give us a healthy perspective when considering how to have our sexuality work for us within the context of our own relationship values and standards.

With an overabundance of sexual rules and regulations surrounding us it is often difficult to adequately discern what works for us. There are so many "should-be's" and "have-to's" that one can easily become lost in adopting a sexual style or pattern that may fit the fantasy model of sex that abounds in the media but does not truly represent who we are!

Even sexual research can confuse the issue. For the lay person looking for information to validate his or her own sexuality, the journey through the annals of sex research can be extremely frustrating. All the differing viewpoints expressed in the literature today indicate that sexual research is still a limiting factor in defining what is true for all people's sexuality. Research does make an important contribution by giving us the

range of people's experiences and by suggesting different perspectives to explore but it cannot tell us how we should be as sexual people. This final determination is for us as individuals to decide based on our own needs of individual and couple satisfaction.

In understanding what our own individual and couple needs are, it is best to keep in mind that our sexuality - like other parts of being human - is never static but always dynamic and changing. At times we may find ourselves focusing a good deal of attention on our sexuality; at other times our sexual appetite may be considerably less. We may also experience changes in the kinds of sensual and sexual activities we enjoy - sometimes we may prefer more cuddling and touching, while at other times we may desire more physical release. Too often when conditions or circumstances change in our sexual relationship which result in us not feeling fulfilled, we blame ourselves and end up feeling sexually inadequate. Hence the importance of knowing where we are at any given time and communicating what we need to our partner!

However, we have grown up in a culture where few of us have learned how to talk about sex in ways that promote understanding and intimacy. In fact, most of our communication about sex has tended to distance us from one another! Talking openly and candidly about sex may be uncomfortable and difficult at first. But with practise and a few simple guidelines we can very quickly develop the sensitive art of sexual negotiation!

1. Choose a place that is both comfortable and private, as well as removed from the bedroom. A romantic fireside dinner can greatly enhance intimate sharing!
2. Using "I" statements is always more effective than telling someone what you want them to do. "I really like it when you...!" or "I really enjoy...!" The more specific you can be the more likely you are to get what you want.

3. Most of us are more open to participating when we feel we have options to choose from. Give your partner a range of activities that include what you would like to give and what you would like to receive. Once more specificity is more fun!
4. Not all our communication with one another has to be verbal. Touch is our only reflexive sense and therefore can be one of the most effective means of sharing and discovering what feels good to us and to our partner. Plan to spend regular time with your partner touching in ways that may not always lead to intercourse and orgasm.
5. Acknowledgement is definately a more powerful method in getting us what we want. Let your spouse know when he or she gives you pleasure!
6. Lighten up! Sex can be intense, romantic, loving, passionate and tender, as well as playful and fun! A good dose of humor should always be included!